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ABSTRACT

A writing across the curriculum program offers an organized and systematic approach to involving all departments in the development of student literacy. Among preliminary steps in implementing these programs are (1) a review of the literature on student literacy, (2) a local assessment of college students' literacy needs, (3) a local assessment of faculty/administrative/staff concerns about and perceptions of student literacy, (4) the formulation of a working definition of student literacy, (5) a study of proficiency requirements currently used to assess literacy, (6) an adaptation of those standardized tests or the development of an appropriate instrument for local needs, (7) the encouragement of faculty support and active participation in an interdisciplinary college committee on student literacy, (8) an assessment of the committee's success and an acceptance of its recommendations, and (9) the use of existing resources and personnel within the existing curriculum. (Appendixes include samples of student and faculty surveys for assessing concerns and needs.) (HOD)

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WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE MODEL

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The problem is obvious: a large percentage of today's students lack the necessary and appropriate communications skills. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, in its recent report, A Nation At Risk, identified several "indicators" of the risk within our educational system:

- *Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.*
- *About 13% of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40%.*
- *Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.*
- *College Board Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980. Average verbal scores fell over 50 points.*
- *College Board achievement tests also reveal consistent declines . . . in English.*
- *Many 17-year-olds do not possess the "higher order" intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly 40% cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay.*

There can be little wonder that student literacy is becoming an increasingly large concern nationwide, even at traditionally first-ranked institutions. The problem is particularly severe at public, community, and junior colleges. As the Commission determined, "*One-fifth of all 4-year public colleges in the United States must accept*

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every high school graduate within the State regardless of the program followed or grades."

It is neither prudent nor reasonable to expect the issue of student literacy to remain exclusively within the province of the English department or the Humanities. A Freshman Composition course, even a two- or three-semester composition course (a luxury few colleges/universities enjoy), cannot by itself remediate the deficiencies in students' language and communications skills--particularly not when those deficiencies are the result of up to twelve years of educational inadequacies.

No panacea exists at the college level, but some realistic solutions are necessary and possible. Most informed educators would agree that the only genuine and lasting way to improve communication skills (especially writing) is to encourage their frequent use. College students must realize that writing is an *integral* skill which deserves at least as much attention as--if not more attention than--computer literacy or study of the sciences (because literacy in the communication skills is a *prerequisite* for literacy in other skills areas, including computer use and science study). College instructors in all subject areas and disciplines must reinforce writing and other communication skills in their classes--by emphasizing and assigning essays, research papers, written reports, reaction papers, lab reports, and essay examinations.

There is perhaps no better way to reinforce writing in all departments and disciplines than by involving all departments and disciplines in the writing process. An organized and systematic approach is provided by a Writing Across the Curriculum Program (called--

on some campuses--a Student Literacy Program). Such a program can be implemented with reasonable ease and--using existing resources--at minimal cost on any campus.

The purpose of an effective Writing Across the Curriculum Program is multifold:

- To increase faculty/administration/staff awareness of the importance of communication/language skills.
- To increase student awareness of the importance of communication/language skills.
- To increase students' actual communication/language skills by allowing campus faculty and students--in all disciplines--to work together to reinforce the importance of writing.
- To make the emphasis on good writing/communication skills and the reinforcing of those skills a campus-wide project, not simply a charge to the English department.
- To increase student literacy at the college level and--through the increased literacy of teacher ed candidates--to increase the level of student literacy in grade schools, junior high schools, and high schools.

The implementation of an effective Writing Across the Curriculum Program requires several preliminary steps:

- A review of the literature on student literacy/student literacy committees. Such a review of data on educational literacy trends is basic; most college administrations will want a narrative demonstration of literacy concerns before giving even initial approval to a Writing Across the Curriculum Program or Committee. (A preliminary bibliography is included in Appendix One.)
- An assessment locally of students' literacy needs at the college level. This can be done through standardized testing, through an appropriate instrument developed for/by a particular college, or through a standardized test adapted for local use. (A sample survey is included in Appendix Two.)
- An assessment locally of faculty/administrative/staff

concerns about and perceptions of student literacy. As with the assessment of students' literacy needs, faculty/administration/staff concerns and perceptions can be surveyed with an existing instrument or with an appropriate instrument developed by/for a particular college. (The survey included in Appendix Three produced some interesting results, particularly when the faculty responses were compared with student responses to similar questions.)

- The formulation of a working definition of student literacy (based on the faculty perceptions, student needs, and literature). This step is much harder than it may initially seem. What is literacy? The standards for literacy will be partly determined by the academic standards of individual colleges--but for a college student literacy *must* be more than the ability to communicate at a minimal level (e.g., a college student should be able to write a coherent and logical argumentative essay, a skill which A Nation at Risk maintains that four-fifths of today's seventeen-year-olds have *not* mastered).

- A study of proficiency requirements (departmental/divisional/college-wide; formal/informal) at regional and national colleges and universities.

- An examination of the standardized tests currently used to assess literacy/to determine proficiency. A standardized test is neither the only nor the best way to measure literacy/proficiency. If, however, a standardized test is to be used, the selection of that test should not be made solely by the representative of the English department. If it is, faculty in other content areas may later complain that the test is too "picky," too "grammar-oriented," too "impractical," etc.

- An adaptation of those standardized tests or the development of appropriate instruments for local needs. After some discussion, all members can eventually agree on some guidelines for assessing student literacy, especially student writing. Those guidelines may be very simple: Does the piece of writing make sense? Are the sentences complete? Is the spelling so poor that the ideas are lost? Is the vocabulary so imprecise that it is impossible to follow the thoughts?

- The encouragement of faculty support of and active participation in an interdivisional, interdisciplinary college committee on student literacy (Writing Across the Curriculum). Once an initial literacy expectation is established, a plan for meeting those expectations must also be agreed upon. That plan may be departmental (e.g., the Social Science instructors agree to give at least one essay test and to assign at least one short paper in every introductory course) or college-wide.

- An assessment of the committee's success; an evaluation of its progress and a measuring of its achievement; a defining of its authority; an acceptance of its recommendations. Recommendations may include the holding of regular discussion/training sessions for faculty in all disciplines (to review actual student papers, tests, assignments, thereby demonstrating the continuing need for reinforcing writing and communication skills in all disciplines); the development of proficiency tests/guidelines (e.g., ways of targeting students with weak skills at the end of the freshman year and again at the end of the sophomore year--or at the end of the first and second semesters); encouraging faculty to rethink syllabi and teaching methods (to assign more oral/written reports, to test more frequently in an essay format, to ask students to synthesize and analyze the information they learn in the classroom).

- The use of existing resources and personnel within the existing curriculum. This goes back to the initial concept of the Writing Across the Curriculum Program. Writing must become a comfortable and natural process in *all* content areas. To offer students who have not attained a satisfactory level of literacy an extra course (e.g., Basic Writing) does not by itself solve the problem.

Writing Across the Curriculum Programs are often met with skepticism, cynicism, and even outright resistance. It is therefore essential to proceed carefully--and diplomatically. When instructors realize that they will not be asked to assume the role of English instructors in addition to their existing roles of teachers in a specific content area, they may become more supportive and (eventually if not immediately) more appreciative of the cooperative effort of a Writing Across the Curriculum Program--and of the results achieved through an increased campus-wide emphasis on communication skills.

APPENDIX ONE

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APPENDIX TWO

SAMPLE STUDENT SURVEY *

*(This survey was used to poll college seniors and was used in conjunction with a short standardized test on English usage.)

HIGH SCHOOL BACKGROUND

How would you rate your high school preparation in writing/communication skills?

Excellent ____
Good ____
Average ____
Below Average ____
Poor ____

COLLEGE COMPOSITION/WRITING

Did you complete Freshman Composition?

Yes ____
No ____
Currently Enrolled ____

What was your final grade in Freshman Composition?

_____

As a result of your Freshman Composition class, do you feel you

Learned a great deal ____
Learned a little ____
Reviewed information already known ____
Didn't learn very much ____

Did you take (or do you plan to take) any follow up-courses in writing? (Please don't count the English general education requirement as a follow-up course.)

Yes ____
No ____

LEARNING CENTER SERVICES

In your four years here, did you use any of the following services?

Drop-In (Open Lab) Program ____
L.C. Credit Classes ____
Workshops ____
Diagnostic Testing ____

Tutor Program ____
Tutor Review Sessions ____
None of the Above ____

LIBRARY USAGE

In your four years here, have you *ever* used the library to complete a library assignment, research a term paper, read materials on reserve, do additional reading for a class in which you were enrolled, etc.?

Yes ____
No ____
(If no, why not?) _____

Have you *ever* taken a library tour of the College library?

Yes ____
No ____

If you were asked to locate an article from May, 1972, in Time Magazine, where in the library would you go to find it?

You need some information on the life of Sigmund Freud. Where in the library would you go to find a good biography or any other bibliographic information?

SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Please be as honest as possible. How often, in the past four years, did you

(of all classes taken at this college)	*0-10%*	*11-25%*	*26-50%*	*51-75%*	*75-100%*
• take essay examinations?					
• write a term paper (or research paper)?					
• complete a library/writing assignment (other than a term or research paper)?					
• take an oral exam or give an oral presentation?					

Are you now

- *thoroughly* satisfied with your communication skills?
- *reasonably* satisfied with your communication skills?
- *not* satisfied with your communication skills?

In which five courses which you took was writing most stressed?

In which classes did you do little or no writing?

Survey developed BTL/WSC/1982.

APPENDIX THREE

SAMPLE FACULTY SURVEY

IN THE MAJORITY OF YOUR UNDERGRADUATE CLASSES	YES	NO
are essay tests given occasionally?		
are essay tests given frequently?		
are essay tests always given?		
is an in-class writing assignment required?		
is more than one in-class writing assignment required?		
is an out-of-class paper required?		
is more than one out-of-class paper required?		
is a library research paper required?		
is more than one library research paper required?		
is a library assignment (other than a full-scale research paper) required?		
is more than one library assignment (other than a full-scale research paper) required?		
is an oral quiz given?		
is more than one oral quiz given?		
is an oral presentation required?		
is more than one oral presentation required?		

Developed BTL/WSC/1982.